

Blood of West and East

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Summary: (Sequel) He had always known that the galaxy was strange. Once he had been a simple soldier, trained how to fight above all else. But his experiences have changed him, potentially forever. He realises that life is more complex than he could have ever imagined. What is more, he knows that there are stranger things than Flood and Forerunners out there, amongst the glistening stars.

1. A Tribute to Heroes

"Ten Huit!" He cried out to the men surrounding him, bringing them into line. The marines stood in two columns, each a single rank thick. The two lines of soldiers looked out across at each other, facing inwards, facing away from the bleak yet beautiful landscape of Eastern Africa. Beautiful indeed it was, the dusty hills, its wide and sprawling sub-savannah. Littered with a great multitude of different grasses and thorned, knotted bushes.

The men stood to attention, watching in silence as two figures began to pass between them. They were awaiting orders, orders from their acting Lieutenant, who in turn was awaiting his own orders from Fleet Admiral Terrance Hood. He was passing between the guardsmen, accompanied by his honoured and rather tall companion.

The man wore an officer's great cloak. Crème in colour, with a high neck collar. Five gold bars and silver stars, his insignia and rank, displayed proudly on his collar and shoulders, cleaned and gleaming in the evening sun. Well-polished boots, they seemed to glow orange almost in the light. Brimmed cap, adorned with the laurels and emblem of the navy.

As he came forward, his mind began to drift, and he looked up into the evening sky above. He watched the clouds, billowing and wandering across the deep orange sky, with streaks of light and shadow visible as the light of the African sun pushed its way through the dust laden sky. It was so peaceful now. The war over. The Covenant gone.

As he continued to gaze into the heavens above, walking between the procession of guardsmen, he wondered if there was something symbolic about it all. The pale and peaceful orange sky, the small and wisping clouds as they travelled leisurely across it. Symbolic perhaps, of a peaceful world in which he and the rest of humanity now lived.

Perhaps it was, perhaps it wasn't. He'd been growing slightly apathetic recently. But only slightly. And he would not forgive the Covenant for what they had done.

He stood there at the head of the procession now, standing by the monument, the fallen tail-fin of a powerful Longsword fighter. A redundant platform now, its toughness and impressive load-out capacity the only reason why the UNSC had produced it for so long. They were being pulled out of service now, replaced by swifter and more agile craft. Perhaps this was also symbolic of something, the ending of two different legacies. The ending of the Longsword series would be synonymous with the ending of another chapter of human history. A dark chapter, but one that was now over, and one that left the doors open for brave and bright new future.

"For us, the storm has passed." He finally began, removing his white brimmed officer's cap in sign of respect. He had collected himself, and was ready to end this ceremony.

"The war is over. But let us never forget those who journeyed into the howling dark, and did not return." This monument was commemorated not just to the war at large. But to its end, and in particular to one of the most reckless campaigns in all human history.

Hood turned his head, glancing at the monument, and in one moment seeing the murals and photographs of all those brave women and servicemen who had lost their lives. The price of victory was always costly. "Their decision, required courage beyond measure. Sacrifice, and unshakable conviction, and their fight...our fight!" He corrected himself, "Was not in vein."

And it had not been. The campaign, whilst reckless, had been successful. More successful than he could ever have hoped possible. It was saddening however that the cost of victory had been so high. "As we start to rebuild, this hillside shall remain barren. It shall remain a memorial to heroes fallen. They ennobled all of us, and they shall not be forgotten."

Many of the soldiers present could not help but feel moved by all this. Hood had chosen his words well. They were honest, and they were sincere. They would never forget this day.

Terrance Hood sighed, and composed himself once more. His speech over, he took his cap from under his arm, wearing it once more. Straightening out, he saluted. A salute to the tens of thousands, to those who would not see the results of their hard earned victory. The ceremony had come to an end. He was the last speaker, and all that was left was one final act of respect.

"Present arms!" The leader of the ranks of men called out again. He was Gunnery Sergeant Pete Stack. A good man, a veteran, and he knew Lord Hood well. He had felt sincerely honoured that he had been chosen for this.

His men responded, and knew what to do next. They had drilled for weeks. They raised their rifles, each a new and flawlessly polished SR Battle Rifle, aiming into the sky and wandering clouds. The select fire weapons fired a single shot at each pull of the trigger, and the first gun salute rang out across the valley around them.

The volley could be heard for miles around. Across the dusty hills, the tracts of grass and knotted bushes, and atop the snow-capped peak of Mt Kilimanjaro herself. Hood stared out across the landscape as the second volley rang out. He stared at the great mountain. He thought it a shame that the memorial had not been placed there, placed atop of a beautiful yet mighty ziggurat. A monument to humanity, greater and more spectacular than anything human hands could ever build. It was a shame, but the valley and grasses were just as fitting. And were certainly a lot more subtle.

Once the final shots had ebbed away, the platoon of marines formed up, ready to march back off to base. It wouldn't be right to break discipline here, not to show disrespect to earth and her fallen heroes. It was also at this moment when another figure began to move.

Tall and imposing, his battle armour gleaming. Segmented and chromium in colour. Each panel, carved and etched, filled with as many alien patterns and hieroglyphs as could be covered. The metal glowed like a polished mirror, bathed and treated with countless ointments and unguents. Each metal panel was segmented and interlocking. Each the shape of an arrow, and ran across the entirety of his powerful body. Moving up his spine until they reached a solid, pointed cowl. The massive, curling hilt of his ancient sword swayed slightly as the individual came closer and closer to Terrance Hood. His four fingers, twitching with a nervous energy known to every warrior of his kind.

The Lord Admiral couldn't help but flinch and grimace. There were just some things that he'd adapt to! "I remember how this war started..." He began to say to the figure as he came to stand beside him. The sun was setting behind them both, casting long shadows. They were concealing this being's features in darkness. Making him look daunting, and sinister because of it.

"I remember what your kind did to mine!" He couldn't help but find venom and hardness sinking into his words. But, how could he not feel hate for a member of the Sangheili race? The injuries they had inflicted on humanity. The injuries which that race had inflicted on his. Because of this alien, Hood knew that he would never see his family again.

"I can't forgive you..." He said with his voice trailing away ever so slightly. He looked into the aliens eyes, finding the strangeness and the animalistic nature of them. His alien armour, his long and elongated neck, those four fanged and terrible mandibles, always twitching, always moving in a way that Hood would never be used to. But these were not the only attributes of Thel 'Vadam. There were other features about him as well, things that did not inspire fear and hate in his heart and mind.

"But..." Hood found himself saying as he stared into the Arbiter's eyes once more, sensing the thoughts and emotions racing through his alien mind. "...I thank you!" He finished, stretching out a hand and

mentioning the alien to take it in his. This was a final symbol of peace, the final page of the chapter. It was also the last symbol he wanted to see today. He was growing sick of them!

"I thank you...for standing by him until the end." Neither had to use his name for the other to understand. It was one of the greatest tragedies of this memorial. "It's hard to believe he's dead" Terrance whispered as they finished the handshake. He and John had history, and he had always respected the man. It hurt him to think that he was also gone. After everything that man had given for humanity, and now he was dead. The victory had been so very bitter.

But Thel 'Vadam was not so sure. He had hunted Spartans for as long as the war had been waged. He had killed many, he had killed the one whose service tag was B-312. One of the greatest warriors he had ever seen, and he knew in his soul that he would not know another. Save for one.

He had met the ultimate soldier, the ultimate survivor, who had endured everything the terrible conflict had thrown at him. His comrade, and perhaps his friend. The Spartan whose service tag he had carved onto this memorial here with his very own claws.

This particular action kept playing through his mind. As soon as he had finished carving the inscription, he had felt uneasy. It had made him wonder, for the first time since the remains of the human vessel had impacted the earth. Had John actually been destroyed? He honestly didn't know, but, going by what the Spartan had survived so far, he had to wonder. Was he still out there somewhere?

"Were it so easy..." He whispered, thinking out loud as like Hood he gazed up at the reddening sky and the slow wandering clouds above. A sky he and his people had so very nearly come to destroy.

The Arbiter would not think about such things right now. These were actions that would haunt him for the rest of his days. And he would have to come to terms with them eventually. This was one of the reasons why he had been at this curious human ceremony today, reconciliation. But right now his mind was on other things, thoughts about his people, and his home world.

But there were also other thoughts he could not help. Ones more simple, and somewhat innocent as well. Thoughts of hope, faith, and loyalty. He couldn't help but wonder. What had become of the Demon since he had been lost?

2. Hammer and Chisel

(Five years later...)

The occupant of the room began to move. Straightening, he lent back, resting his head against the grated wall behind. Looking around, at the multitude crates and supply boxes, and at the thick walls of the ship and the heavy vehicles leering over him.

It was a shut in place. It was close, he felt hemmed in. This feeling felt enhanced by the oppressive heat which he'd deliberately set the cargo bay to. And, it felt good. In the past he'd only often felt secure when underground. The deepest sections of UNSC vessels

replicated that sense of security. So secure he felt, with the temperature of the air burning in his lungs and the spiralling, wisping vapours permeating every pore of his skin that he sat unhelmeted, and began to close his eyes in bliss.

With his eyes shut, images began to play across his mind's eye. Memories as clear as when they'd first been seen. The faces of his comrades, lost comrades, lost to war. He could see images of war. He could hear the sounds of battles past. The dust, the smouldering fires. Men and marines, moving, fighting and dying. Flashes of muzzle fire. Rolling tanks and APC's. Sights many believed human eyes should never have to see. But none of it bothered him. Not here. Within this sanctuary, his emotions never stirred.

It was a rare moment when a Spartan found peace of mind. In those lulls between missions, it was often that they only ever felt angst. But today was one of those rare days, where he was able to relax. Where the tempest of his war-hardened mind calmed, not so unlike a flattening, calming sea. And where in the safety of this cocooning section, he could push his duties aside and fail to give a damn about anything!

_ "Peace." _

"Fredric-104, report to the bridge. All bridge crew report, this is Commander Carmo Aldana I repeat, report to the bridge!" A voice demanded through the ship's comms. System.

_ "Damn it!" _ The hardened soldier thought on reflex as the order invaded his peaceful world. Then rigorous training kicked in, and like an instinct it began to dictate every one of his thoughts and actions. The Spartan mentality overtook him once more. He stood bolt upright, taking the sturdy helmet at his side, pushing it down over his head and twisting it instantly in place. With a brief rush of air, his suit's oxygen seal formed and then pressurized. His Mjolnir armour's internal environment altered immediately, leaving Fredric helpless as the 'spa-like' embrace of his humid atmosphere was replaced with the air conditioned, all but featureless one common to every Mk6 system.

The cargo bay door unlocked with a clunk, opening automatically as he paced towards it. He headed out, sprinting through the passageways of a vessel he knew like the backs of his hands. Vaulting up ladders and charging through narrow corridors, he headed for the bridge. They had been on this voyage for thirteen months now, and they were at their last objective point. The last encountered location of that distant UNSC distress signal. Then home.

He looked over himself, checking his holsters and equipment. Three M9's, an MA5D Individual Combat Weapon System, an M6H Pistol and two CQC Combat Knives. Armed and dangerous. But cooped up inside a cramped Prowler for 387 days, he hadn't yet had a single reason to use them. Other than a _SDV_-class heavy corvette they'd encountered in the depths of space, not a single hostile had been encountered. The remnants were certainly evasive bastards.

It had been strange to see a corvette travelling through real space. And as they had tracked it, for hours, it had remained travelling at sub light. Its Slipspace core apparently non-functional. With its course and coordinates taken, they'd left it, reporting its position

to command. Slipping away without a sound. Daring not to attack. Rumour had it that the Covenant remnant was installing energy shields in every class of ship now.

This had all happened seventeen days ago. Then, at 07:00 hours yesterday, an information had been received from FLEETCOM, conveying only a single word: "Thanks!" They'd finally tracked the slippery little fish down and sunk it! And, Intel was in. No shields whatsoever! It had been an unmodified corvette. Their caution had been for nothing.

An unshielded vessel, against a heavy Prowler which knew exactly where to hit it to kill it. The potential highlight of their mission lost. And it had condemned the entire crew to boredom. They'd been thrilled. Especially the Marines. Sarcasm, of course. Moral was low, even though everyone knew it'd all be over in a fortnight. As Officer of Operations, acting sergeant and second in command, crew moral was one of Fredric's primary concerns. He always had time for them, for every man under his command. But there is only so much you can do for bored and restless soldiers.

Again, back to the mission. It was a dull assignment to say the least. Hopefully AI's would be able to retrieve some useful data from the dead corvette's data cores. Once clues to Covenant sanctuaries had been recovered, remnant elements would be living on borrowed time. The Barely a Wake had performed its duty. At least the men knew they had purpose.

Now arrived on the bridge, Fred scanned left to right, picking out everything. There was no glass, and no windows. Only terminal screens, displaying the details of the outside world via sophisticated visual systems. Data-feed systems that could cycle through the entire electromagnetic spectrum, capable of detecting signals of any kind. From solar flares, to gamma strikes, to encrypted enemy transmissions. Everything physical.

Yet more systems were feeding these bridge instruments data. Systems capable of capturing the most exotic of physics in action. Analysing quarks and tachyons, perceiving Slipspace and other extra-dimensional phenomena. The rarest of events. Every surveillance tool imaginable, the greatest of effort given so that UNSC Prowlers could succeed in their purpose. Gathering intelligence and offering electronic support to humanities' fleets.

Visual suites, holographics tables and command chairs with integrated HUD's. Each one unique to a single crew member, tuned to function with maximum efficiency, allowing them to best perform their individual duties. Many crewmen were already here, busily tapping away at holo-pads. Others were still arriving from behind him, heading up from their mess halls and sleeping quarters. Scurrying around the giant Spartan, Fred counting off their names as they passed.

Soon the bridge was alive with movement. Officers and crew climbing into their command chairs, those already working calling out information to each other in update. With little more than a nod of satisfaction, he strode towards the centre of the bridge. There was a helm, with a fully integrated pilot seat and the largest of the bridge's holo-tables behind it. The swivel chair could turn to it whenever the busy occupant inside demanded.

"Sir!" Fredric announced to the captain, stood to attention in salute.

"As you were Lieutenant. As you were." Commander Aldana replied flatly, the majority of his concentration fixed on the command of his ship. There was a particular buzz about the bridge, Fredric noticed. It was unusual, not since the appearance of the Corvette had he seen them all this busy. Everyone's eyes were fixed on their screens. He paced around the deck, looking over multiple crewmen's shoulders. And the data on what they were seeing was enough to make even Fredric-104's eyebrows shoot upwards.

"Campbell." The Spartan called to the middle aged Sensor Station Officer. "Switch us to visual feed. Put what you're seeing on screen." It was protocol to have the main visual systems offline. The smallest transmission, the smallest radiation emission was enough to blow their position. The war had taught crews of Prowlers paranoia when it came to ensuring stealth. Nothing was left chance. But this was one of those times where they needed visual.

"On screen!" Lt. Rhys Campbell updated after a few quick clicks on his terminal. The entire bridge lit up around them, the sights of the outside world as clear as could be seen through any glass. The digital bubble cockpit gave them a near perfect perception of their surroundings. They could 'see' through the entire hull of the ship. Front to back, even the floors beneath their feet were illuminated by the twinkling lights of distant suns and nebulae. Captain Aldana climbed out of his chair, and looked straight ahead in awe.

Before them was a single star, a terrestrial sun. The central point of a distant solar system, well beyond the borders of human space. Blocking the light of that sun, between it and the Barely a Wake was a planet. And if ever there had been one worthy of the name, it was an idyllic one to say the least. Blue oceans, seas and white, spiralling clouds. Weathered plains and snow-capped mountains. Vibrant coral reefs and rocky crags of coastlines.

There were blood red deserts, yet great plains also, tracts of countless shades of green. High concentration of oxygen and mere trace quantities of carbon dioxide indicated that these colours were result of plants, rich in chlorophyll. The life factories of a healthy biosphere, welcoming of life and a diversity of ecosystems.

Three main and colossal continents lay before them. Alongside were smaller sub-continents, and a multitude of islands littered around a mainland. All like earth, like her in so many ways. It was astonishing. Incredible that such a lush and bountiful world had been discovered. A recourse more valuable than all the precious metals in the cosmos. Many crewmen shared smiles, knowing that in time, as humanity began to prosper once more, that this could become one of the best of possible colony worlds someday.

But, there was also a sourness in their eyes. Stony glances shared. For whilst this idyllic planet lay between them and its terrestrial sun, so did another collection of objects lie between it and them. Twisted metal, and burned out superstructures. Armour smashed, bodies floating and spinning in the void. Alien bodies. The blue and purple armoured hulls of shattered and bisected warships. This had been a

Covenant battle-fleet. And the key word in that statement: Had.

"Piecing together the ship remnants...78 vessels counted. All hands lost." It was obvious that this was true. What was left of the once formidable fleet had been arranged in caravan. Whatever had happened to them, they hadn't even had the chance to adopt a battle formation. Well and truly annihilated.

"What did this. Brutes? Flood?" The captain asked. No wonder the Remnants had been so quiet in this area of space. There weren't any! It made little sense, but they had to figure out what had happened here. What had the aliens stumbled upon that could inflict such damage?

"No sir. Not Brutes." Campbell replied. "There's no Jiralhanae corpses in the debris. An engagement of this magnitude would have destroyed at least some ships of both sides." Logical, given that the capabilities of the two factions were very similar. "And no signs of infections. None. Not Flood either. Whatever did this sir, did it in seconds and left them for dead."

Carmo Aldana couldn't help but feel a chill run down his spine. The back of his neck felt cold, and clammy. Something was badly wrong with this system. "Then what? Only Forerunner tech could have done this." He didn't know of anything else that could inflict damage so quickly.

"Possibly sir. I'm seeing a lot of battle damage that matches sentinel fire. I'll need Danii to confirm it." AI's were good like that. But what of the source of the attack?

"Nothing on Slipspace watch." Lukas Greene, Chief Engineer called out. "There's been no recent jump in or outs across this system. But Campbell's getting some damn strange readings from the planet below."

All eyes tracked back to the world below them. So, not so innocent looking after all? Perhaps some ancient defence grid, tripped as soon as the ships had blundered out of their portals. Perhaps there were disadvantages in the Covenant tactic of jumping into orbit. Recklessly doing so without Intel had killed them all.

They just needed to confirm what had done it.

"I don't want us any closer to the planet. But continue scanning. Our mission demands it." Aldana sighed in bitterness. An event as serious as this could lead to an extension. Months could be added onto the time where they saw home and family again. Again, if duty demanded it.

Meanwhile, Fredric's brow was furrowed. Concealed behind his impassive gold visor, his eyes betrayed concern. He'd witnessed Forerunner weaponry first hand. He'd fought Onyx sentinels, the most formidable Forerunner rank and file yet to have been discovered. A swarm of these comparably tiny machines could bring down a capital ship when focussing their combined firepower. Yet none of the wreckage he was looking at matched what he'd seen of that ancient race.

"Keep collecting data. Campbell, what can you tell me about those readings?" The Spartan asked. He was getting a bad feeling about this place, a sixth sense telling him that all was not well. They were dwelling here too long. And they hadn't yet gotten to the issue of the distress signal they'd tracked.

"Not much sir. I'm getting steady riffs of energy, like a pulsar, regular as a heartbeat. There's something inside generating an EM field, perhaps the planet itself." Weird. Gas giants such as Jupiter were capable of producing electromagnetic signals, produced by ionized gas as it churned and boiled within. It was often said by some that planets sang. But not a planet this small. Not a terrestrial world. They had to know what was causing it.

"Time to bring out the big guns, Spartan?" Aldana suggested with a hint of a smile. Everyone knew what, or who for that matter, he was referring to.

"About time somebody gave me something to do around here! Cooped up inside this tin can of a ship? I'm surprised you men haven't all gone stir crazy!" A smooth, female voice called out at them. Short cropped hair, gentle features and melancholy eyes. Her deep carmine-coloured attire; a form fitting cat suit with distinct rib-lines across her waist and a high-neck collar. This was Danii, and as she appeared on her holo-pillar, arms crossed and right foot tapping, it was clear that she was just as fed up as everyone else with the long mission!

"Give me work, give me problems, puzzles to solve!" She announced with false elation, making the crew smile. Some people have a natural gift, the ability to brighten up a room with merely their presence. This AI was one of them. And her appearances made the long days just that little bit more bearable.

"Scan the planet below. Full analysis, determine where the signal's coming from." Fred asked immediately, seemingly unmoved by her efforts.

"I will get a smile out of you someday Spartan!" The AI replied, hands on hips, firing off one of her intense yet playful stares. "Mark my words! Scanning and documenting. All ship's instruments slaved and under my direct control."

AI's could be magnificent at times. Tasks that would otherwise take human crews months, even years to complete could take a Smart AI minutes. Images began to blink and scroll across the crew's displays, too fast for any of them to take in. Thousands, tens of thousands of images. Grassy plains, and open flats. Pole to pole, equator to tropics. The planet's entire topography. She could pick out every inch of ground and sea. From landmasses, to grains of soil and sand itself.

The Barely a Wake could see all this. Beyond its comical name, the ship was an absolute masterpiece. And Danii could wield this tool to its absolute, and maximum potential. And what was more, the sights and wonders of the unseen landmasses below startled the AI.

"Woah! Now these are things you don't see every Tuesday!" A stunned Danii exclaimed. Every member of the crew knew it to. Many a jaw dropped. She was understating it. Whilst each individual picture

passed to quickly for them to take in, as a collective, the images began to form noticeable patterns. Patterns, and revelations that were nigh impossible in their probability of existence.

Fields of wheat and vegetable crops. Farmsteads, quaint homes. Villages and rising cities. And most shocking of all, was people. A multitude of humanoid, evidently sapient life. Seen marching out across the continents in convoy, passing through every type of terrain. Carrying blades and wearing ancient armour. Shields slung on back. Armies on the move.

What had they stumbled across? Civilization, vibrant and flourishing. And this world had developed right on what felt like the very doorstep of UNSC space. Nigh statistically impossible. Yet there it was! Real and alive before them. It would certainly be a long debriefing once they all got home!

It was then that Danii saw something else. Something she hadn't been looking for. Every instrument focussed immediately, now on a single point as she redirected her attention. A battered and broken shape. Blasted scree, fire, and poisonous clouds of carbon monoxide surrounded it. The deconstructed remains of a human ship, strewn across a barren wasteland could be seen by the Prowler as its sensors pierced through the thick, volcanic clouds.

It was a discovery that would close the final chapter of their mission. The source of the distress signal had been found.
"Destroyed after all then." A downhearted Spartan thought quietly to himself. His old friend really was gone.

Then Campbell heard a bleep, indicating that he needed to focus on his instruments. "Sir, I'm observing changes in the signal emanating from the planet." He updated, urgency clear in his voice.

"Proceed, Lieutenant." Fredric authorised.

"The signal's magnitude has grown noticeably. Its frequency is no longer regular. Highly erratic now, and still increasing." The regular intervals were gone. The pulses fluctuated immensely. Some seconds apart, others no more than microseconds in interval.

The signal was frenzied, violent even. Fredric's instincts were screaming at him, more urgent than any warning siren could ever be. Something was badly wrong. Everyone knew it, a perceptive and experienced crew. What had caused the change? Their scans? An entire Covenant battlefleet lay dead. What hope did a tiny Prowler with limited defences at best stand against what had killed them? No longer safe, the planet screaming, and with the riddle of the Forward Unto Dawn answered, it was time to leave.

"Dani, power FTL, we're going right now!" Aldana commanded, he'd seen enough. There was something beyond logic that told him they were all in danger. As if a great darkness was descending on his mind.

"Plot a course, take us out ASAP." The Spartan had sensed it too. His responsibility was always the safety of the crew. He would do everything in his power to protect them.

"Course plotted, engines charging." She reported. "Transition into

slipspace will occur in t minus-

***Thump***

The power systems went stone dead, plunging them into twilight as their view of the outside disappeared. Just for a split second the power died, but long enough to force the translight engine into safety mode. For it to cut out, preventing them from jumping as the computers failed, and began to reboot. With nav systems offline, they were on manual alone. And could not go to FTL until the computers were back.

"Shit! What just happened?" A surprised Captain demanded from the crew.

"Some kind of power fluctuation, the entire grid went dead, we're completely blind!" Lukas called out. And no one had a clue how it had happened. Everything had failed: Sensors, thruster control. Even Danii, who operated independently from the ship power systems had somehow cut out, and was herself rebooting as her systems attempted to recalibrate.

"Systems are recalibrating. Keep on your stations, do your jobs." Fredric told them, sternly. Keeping them cool. "Scan our space as soon as you get systems back Lieutenant." he ordered to Campbell, coming over to his station and placing a hand on his chair.

"Yes sir!" The seasoned bridge officer replied, taking a breath to calm. "Ok, systems are back...now! Performing a three sixty degree sweep and...oh...oh my god!" He gasped in absolute horror. The lights of the bridge came online with a flicker, the lights of the galaxy returning to their view as the bubble capsule switched back on. But that was not the only thing they could see. No.

Like a great tower it dwarfed them. Impossibly large and thin, oh so slender for such a colossal object. Whilst perhaps, it would be an exaggeration to say that its silhouette was identical to the shaft of a needle. It was not so far from the truth as to be ridiculous. Matte black, etched with an array of glistening, larva-orange runes. Each symbol the size as a UNSC destroyer. Its prow was sharpened like a fork or pointed trident. Two blades, large and heavy enough to skewer a mountainside. Thin and long like a spear or needle, and with a large, bulbous and stunted base at the ship's extreme stern.

It was the largest, and most evil looking ship that the silent human crew had ever seen. And many felt that it would be the last they'd ever see. Many amongst them had made unfounded links between this gigantic vessel and the death of the remnant fleet. Perhaps it had been summoned here by the signal from the planet? It was as if a spectre of death was hanging over them, and that soon it would envelop its wings around them in deadly embrace.

"Sir..." Campbell began, pulling himself together a little. "Based on what we can see, instruments estimate that this ship is 100 kilometres in length."

"That's roughly the distance between New York and Philadelphia!" Danii replied the moment she booted back, putting it in perspective. "Unknown alien vessel type, matches nothing like we've ever seen. It's generating a weak field of energy, similar to something I picked

up just before everything went offline. No, scratch that! Identical to the field I detected before! This is what caused the systems crash."

Perhaps it was accidental? An unfortunate effect of two alien technological bases coming into close proximity with each other. But their instincts were telling them that this was not the case. And, they didn't have to wait long to learn their feelings were well founded.

"Trespassing vessel, you have violated the fringes of our space! Leave this realm, immediately! Comply, now! We will not ask you a second time."

"Our comms. have been hacked!" Danii reported. "It happened instantly, I didn't even see it coming!" The enemy vessel was hailing them on a one way comm-link. They couldn't reply back, but it could speak to them.

Nothing about this spoke of peace or glad tidings. The unknown voice barked with venom, harsh and distorted as if speaking through a faulty loud speaker. But most disconcerting, was the voice spoke in English. It was obvious, this previously unencountered race had developed a comprehensive understanding of humanity. The enemy ship knew them. Whilst the tense crew of the Barely a Wake knew nothing of the alien race screaming at them in threat. Save one thing. They had done something in their eyes that was severely forbidden.

"We know your position, humans. We can hear you, we can smell you. We feel you in our minds and know you in our hearts. You have not a tool that can hide yourselves from us!" It was a bluff. Had to be. Nothing could achieve even half of those things!

"Danii! Can the ship jump out yet?" Aldana begged. He wasn't in a position to deny these alien's wishes.

"Not yet Commander. The system took a big hit, I'm pushing it as hard as I can but any further and a core implosion will be nigh inevitable!" Long and short if it, they were in deep shit.

"It's a trick men." Aldana consoled them, thinking on what the voice had said. "A trick. If they disabled our ship intentionally, then the whole thing could be a ruse. They want us to drop our cloak, or send a transmission. Even if they've detected us, the things they're telling us are lies."

"Oh?" The voice oiled back at them. "Lies you think? Little human, tiny primate, what could you possibly know of us? Do you know all the knowledge of the universe and present yourself a god? No. Your faith is misguided. A product of your own Neolithic innocence. How primitive indeed your kind are!" The callous and mocking owner of the voice was attempting to provoke them. They all knew it, but Fredric could see terror in his men's eyes. Frightened, not knowing how this being could know these things. Men were brave, but when fear infected them it rooted itself like a virus. It could not be shaken easily. Fred knew he had to act.

"What do you want from us?" Fredric announced to thin air, everyone looking at him in shock. This went beyond logic. But he knew what was happening. "To leave? If we have invaded your space, we will exit it

without another wor- " "Ahh! Intelligence!" The voice barked back with glee. "You are not completely pathetic, you humans and your flimsy, little, ships. Arrogant, stupid, but with courage in your hearts. You will not change. You are a blight, and you will not change."

What gave this being the right? What right did it have to think it was better than them? Because of a technological gap? It was this being that was arrogant. Not them!

"YOU THINK ME ARROGANT!?" The commander of the alien vessel screamed back at them. "You're boldness and your nature betrays you. You should know to mind your thoughts, Spartan-104. For you may just have killed, your entire crew, thanks to your transgressions!" Everyone stared at Fredric. What madness was this? He had done no transgressions!

Fred knew it now. This being wasn't lying. Something aboard that vessel could read his and everyone else's minds. This being was sadistic and cruel, would destroy them in a heartbeat. And its voice betrayed murderous intentions. He didn't know what he could say that could help, but even if there was the slightest chance he could stop this from happening he had to try it!

"Let us leave, our ships will not transgress here again!" The Shaw-Fujikawa drive was seconds away from firing.

"Oh, but now you know of us, Spartan. You know my kind is here and you have learned many secrets about our world below! You have seen, too much. Learned knowledge which cannot be known by outsiders. You cannot now leave this, 'system' as you would call it, alive!"

Fredric's mind was swimming now, was there no power he had to salvage this situation? Was this merely one last gambit of a cruel individual who wished to toy with them? Was he bullshitting them? Making up laws and commandments just so he could lead them on? If the being wanted to get inside their heads, it was succeeding.

"However, your deaths are not assured. You have one chance at survival, a single choice that will save you. You cannot leave this system, only dwell within. Your fate, is now down there, on Arda. Until the end of your days. Weapons-master! Energise particle streams. Let them feel the hammers' wrath!"

The Dark Marshall, the owner of the voice, smiled. Revelling in the fear and confusion that he'd caused. He'd watched them as they'd approached Arda, through the simple dimension they had yet failed to master. He'd monitored their scans, and had pounced on them as soon as they'd learned too much.

A shame. If they had been less curious, they would have been allowed to leave. He'd never actually had any intension of letting them go, but that was the sealing of their fate. He enjoyed watching the humans panic!

"Grond, Grond!" His servants began to shout from their stations. With their battle cry ringing in his and the human crew's ears, the multitude of runes and lava-orange symbols across the exterior of his fine chariot burned deep crimson. Circuits of energy began to travel like neon through its thick, armoured hull, against what before had

been a dark black wall against the void of space. These ley lines burned with ethereal energies, and from the spine of the vessel a perfect sphere of light emerged. Glowing and growing in size.

A Slipspace portal opened up as the crew of the Barely a Wake desperately tried to reach safety. The ball of light reached its climax, and a beam of energy struck the little Prowler, burning its hull, and like a battering ram it cast them away from the sanctuary of that dimension. Hurtling into real space. "And then your engines were destroyed...Now you can never escape." He told the listing ship.

Clearing his mind and in one last act, blocking their S.O.S, the Numenorian commander disconnected himself from their communication systems, walking back to his chambers. It would be decades before another human ship would trespass here now. "Like the others, you will not escape from our domain."

3. Hunters and Eorlings

Aragorn's head was pressed against the rocky ground. The forests of before were gone, replaced by hilly steppes and lichen-covered stone. Energised by the pursuit his breath was hard, his heart beating fast. Running made a man feel alive. Only war gave a feeling more potent. Slowing his breath, feeling his heart slow as his body recovered, he began to listen. In an attempt to locate the sounds of those oh so heavy footsteps. And he was not alone in his mission.

The warrior behind him stared at the ranger with interest, he too collecting his breath, astounded by his allies' endurance. They moved not only by day, but at night as well. They had set and held a pace he'd never expected of them. He continued to watch Aragorn as he lay still on the ground. This was not one of the many disciplines learned by a modern soldier. These men relied on sophisticated instruments, EMS from aircraft and orbiting battleships to perform these tasks. They took these technologies for granted. This was a forgotten science, the ways of a hunter. Utilizing nothing more than one's own senses to track your enemies down.

It was impressive to say the least.

He was a man that was in tune with nature. And as he listened, he began to hear them. Sound travelled better through the hard ground than it did the air. Drawing from decades of experience and what he had learned of the Uruks so far, he began to deduce aspects of their movement. He had done this many times, and of the past few times, the sound had been getting louder and closer. Now however, they felt distant from them once more. And that only meant one thing.

"Their pace has quickened" He said out loud in realisation. Upon hearing this, a still bundle held atop the Master Chief's shoulder began to move. "Then...we have little time." Boromir coughed as he turned to face Aragorn. He was recovering, but was still weak. His injuries had taken their toll and he had no hope of keeping pace with the others in his condition. It did not mean that he was pleased however with the humiliation of being carried!

"HURRY!" Aragorn called back, down towards the others as he took flight once again. John passed by, the hilt of his claymore, and his

BR55 Battle rifle glinting in the high sun. Keeping close on Aragorn's tail. They were on the high rise of a bank, running up and down over the rising and falling geography around.

As his armoured boots died away, Legolas came sprinting over the verge. Lightest footed of them all, his eyes set with resolve, and he showed no signs of fatigue. "Come Gimli!" He called, with all the encouragement he could offer as he hurtled after the others. There was then a brief moment where the cliff was empty of people. But soon at the foot of the verge, appeared a sweating, wheezing Gimli. He had the hardest task of them. His heavy armour putting far greater strain on him than the others. Unlike Chief, he didn't have the bionics that made wearing the Mjolnir Mk.6 so effortless.

"The long days on the little one's pursuit" He gasped as he sucked deep breaths of air into his lungs. "No food but lembas bread, nor rest of any kind." With the Master Chief's infernal magic, they never lost sight of the Uruk's path. Not even in the near pitch black of moonless nights!

"Come fair lady, keep moving! Must keep moving." He encouraged as a sixth figure turned the rocky corner of the path behind. She was not used to hardship like this. But despite it, Cortana was doing well, well enough to prevent her return to the Chief's helmet point. A place that, now with her new lease of life, she was learning to hate. Her cloak flapped as she ran, and her body screamed in protest as she pushed herself to what felt like some kind of breaking point. But it made her feel alive, and the pain was good. She wanted to hold onto this, keep moving forward, and not let herself down. So far, her determination had rewarded her. She had kept pace, and had not impeded the progress of the others. Nor the distance they needed to make.

And that was another determination. She wanted Merry and Pippin to be safe as well. With all her heart. Aragorn had convinced her, and everyone else that whilst their chances were slim, that it was still possible to catch the Uruks. And that with their fullest wits, and John, that they would be able to rescue them. They all had courage, this was sure. Balls the damn size of cruisers to want to tangle with those monsters again! Especially Boromir. He had suffered the most at their cruel hands.

For another day, six hunters raced after their captive friends. Their morale buoyed from the day before, by a fallen leaf-pendant of Lothlorien, and not idly did the leaves of Lothlorien fall. The hobbits were alive, perhaps one of them at the least. And this only fuelled their determination to catch up.

Most surprising of all however, had come not from the hobbits, but from Boromir. At the start of the day, with the sun rising low in the sky, he had forbade Chief from taking him in his arms. He had finally had enough. "I would rather die, and suffer the deaths of Merry and Pippin than spend another day like a helpless babe in your arms! I assure you, I have strength enough now to match you in a day of running."

Chief had been monitoring his condition carefully. It was slightly premature, but Boromir was a tough SOB. He was most certainly correct. "Don't fall behind." John had said in his usual manner.

And so they had set off, back to full strength, the six companions on their mission to save their friends. And indeed, whether through determination or strength of muscle alone, Boromir kept the pace. He did not slow them down, keeping line with both Gimli and Cortana.

"Keep breathing, that's the key my friends. Breathe!"

"What's the matter boys? Can't even keep up with girls now can you?" They encouraged each other and worked well as a team, keeping themselves motivated. Following the example of the others.

Eventually however, their strength failed them. After running for days, with little rest or sleep, they had to stop. But their achievement had been worth it. They'd left Emyn Muil far behind. Now they were back inside the lands of men.

They finally stopped where they stood, between two low cliffs, between what felt like a natural gate. Cortana threw herself on the ground, and Boromir collapsed onto the mossy floor, completely exhausted. Chief came to join them, whilst Gimli stood with the others. The two groups resting at each side. Water was provided for the Gondorian, Cortana simply lay motionless on her back. Her eyes shut, giving time for her energy to return. It was certainly odd that a machine would feel fatigue.

They were at the mouth of a wide open clearing now. Lush grasslands were ahead, the labyrinthine passageways of twisted rock gone. And in the distance, they were sure that they could make out what seemed like fields. Cultivated by the hands of men. "Rohan, home of the Horse-lords." Aragorn had breathed, once he'd recognised that they had passed into their territory.

"It's strange, the Uruk-hai must be desperate if they'd risk passing through hostile land." Chief pointed out as they sat, pondering on what he knew of the people here from Elrond's study. How long ago that felt now.

Everyone nodded in reply. It was. There was something strange at work within these lands. They sensed that Saruman's hand was at play. Setting his will against them. How long would it be till he was capable of challenging the greater powers of the world? "He must be destroyed. The wizard dead, and his head thrust on a spike before he can inflict more damage upon good and honest folk!" Boromir cursed, and spat into the ground below.

"What a lovely image!" Cortana remarked, who just for the fun of it started to imagine what his head would look like, thrust onto a spear atop of some foul cities' walls. It was then that Legolas, stood on sentinel as he always was, lifted up his head in alert.

"There are horses, the sound of many thunderous hooves approaching!" He reported to them. Everyone turned to face him. They couldn't hear anything. But as moments passed, John began to pick up the faint but unique sound of a great many animals charging ever closer. Astonishing. The elf's ears were better than his suits! And soon everyone else could hear it too. Trampling closer and closer.

"Keep back, rest your backs against the cliffs." Aragorn ordered.

"And throw your elven cloaks upon you. Let them pass by without us being seen." They did as he commanded. Soon they were completely hidden from sight, perfectly blended into the rock behind.

As the riders charged through the natural gate, everyone watched in silence. Their mount's hooves pounded into the soft ground, making the floor of the world tremble as they rode between the comrades. Loud and galloping, kicking up wads of soil and weeds as they sped on by. What fine pieces of kit the elven cloaks made during these times, all six companions thought. Not one of the warriors suspected them as they thundered past with haste.

The riders were many, and once the last of them had come into view, Chief estimated that there must be over one hundred. Brave human soldiers, stoic and defiant in a hard and fearful world. It felt good to be in the company of men once more! As they trampled down into the clearing below, Aragorn flung his cloak aside. Revealing himself to the world.

"You should do the same." He asked of the others. And in trust, they did as asked. Yet they were hesitant, and last to reveal herself was Cortana. The AI made to move, but she had barely flinched a millimetre before John had stopped her.

"Cortana, stay down. These men could be unpredictable. Stay out of sight until they are gone." "Ok, understood Chief." It felt odd to take orders from him now. But she was sure that was she human, and in service the UNSC that she would be his inferior. She would do as he asked. It was only to keep her safe.

Aragorn mentioned for them to come forwards, standing in unit behind the swift Eorlings. "Riders of Rohan!" He bellowed down from the mouth, causing many heads to turn in surprise below. "What news do you bring from the Mark?" It was a bold move, and soon the cohort of men had turned, doubled back and were heading straight for them, charging back up the incline. It was a stirring sight, these fine cavalry, their thoroughbred horses and the fierce soldiers on their backs.

Soon the four comrades found themselves surrounded, caught inside a tightening ring, the skilled riders moving in a running circle. Closer and closer. Drawing inwards. Chief stood silent, nerve calm. The others did the same, standing and watching without flinching. All was a blur and whirl of motion. Then suddenly the riders halted. Spears and lances lowered, some riders holding bows. Arrows ready and primed. Then, the riders fell utterly still.

After a tense pause, one of their number rode forward. He was tall, broader than the others, and a great plume of white and grey horsehair streamed down from the crest of his helm. John looked deep into the man's eyes. There was nothing that suggested a hint of fear in them. The horseman advanced until the tip of his spear was a mere foot away from the Spartan's neck. Only then did the Third Marshall of the Mark speak to them.

"What are you doing in these lands? What business does an elf, a dwarf, two men...and a knight...have in the Riddermark?" His voice was loud and commanded obedience. But not one of them responded. "Speak quickly!" He cried again, his patience was not infinite.

Boromir was the first to respond. He lifted up his right hand in a sign of peace, and took a single step towards the rider confronting them. "I am Boromir, fair rider. Prince-Steward of Gondor, High Warden of the White Tower of Minas Tirith." He spoke calmly and with great nobility. Showing no single sign of his physical weakness. "I and my kindred draw from the North, hunting orcs that trespass through your sovereign lands." His answer was fine and eloquent, but did not seem to sway the hearts of the Rohirrim.

"At first I thought that you yourselves were Orcs!" Ælomer replied with equal. He respected Boromir, and had heard of his gallantry and deeds of bravery. But there was concern in his eyes. "Perhaps you underestimate your chosen prey however, great captain? They were swift and well-armed. No normal orcs, but foul and dangerous Uruk-hai. To hunt them in such manner is foolish, certainly you would have yourselves become prey if your paths had crossed."

Indeed, a few five warriors would be fools to try and best a troupe of the savage creatures. The Uruk's numbers had been many. "But..." Ælomer continued, "You do not strike me as normal soldiers. Least of all you!" He announced, nodding at John. The man was wise and did not underestimate them. But he was not yet satisfied. Boromir's fine words for all their virtue were not enough.

"Why do you not speak, silent ones?" He demanded sternly. He had not the time for this! The lives of his countrymen were depending on him.

"Give me your name, horse-master." Gimli replied with spite, his dwarven pride getting the better of him. Offended that his name would be demanded of him. "Then I will give you mine, and more besides." Much to the horror of Boromir.

Ælomer's eyes blazed, and his men murmured angrily against the dwarf's loose and thoughtless words. They couldn't help but take them to heart. These strangers were in his people's lands, and his country was at war. This dwarf had absolutely no right to be evasive with him. The Uruks weren't the only trespassers here, and trespassers should be prepared to be questioned!

Handing his spear to another, the insulted rider leaped from his horse. He strode forward, tightly holding the hilt of his sword. "I would cut off your head, beard and all, Master Dwarf if it stood but a little higher from the ground!"

"He stands not alone!" Bellowed Legolas at this injustice towards his friend, bending his bow and fitting an arrow with hands that moved quicker than sight. "You would die before your blade was drawn!"

This was getting out of hand! Both sides had been through much and their tempers were frayed. And as the spears and bows of the riders zeroed in on them, both Chief and Aragorn sprang between them. Aragorn's hands raised in pardon, Chief behind him, arms outstretched in barrier between his comrades and Ælomer.

"Your pardon Marshall!" Aragorn implored. He had spent time with the Rohirrim, and knew the man's rank. "If you knew the customs of dwarves you'd have realised that you have insulted my companion." He

said, sending a stony glance at Gimli behind. Both needed to see that there were two sides to this.

"Besides." Chief replied, calmly but sternly. "We're all allies in this. To fight each other is madness."

The warrior and his deep, gritty voice seemed to calm Aًomer. He broke his ferocious gaze with Gimli, looking up at his men, signalling them to lower their weapons. The soldiers complied, but many of their eyes were fixed on the strange giant's helm. On the horseless warrior who almost stood eye level with them.

The heat of the confrontation had begun to wane.

"My friend speaks truth. We are allies of Rohan." Aragorn continued. "I am Aragorn, son of Arathron. The others you do not know are Gimli, son of Gloin, Legolas of the Woodland realm, and..." He paused, realising he did not know how to correctly address this man he trusted with his life. In turn, demanding a bit of quick thinking from Chief.

"I am John, son of...Halsey. I am a traveller, hailing from the east, of lands beyond the Red Mountains. It goes against my people's customs to speak of my kind, or of my culture." From a certain point of view, he wasn't actually lying. Classified was classified. "Sauron is a threat to my people. And he must be destroyed." It wouldn't matter if his answer wasn't good enough. So long as these Rohirrim knew he was an enemy of their enemy, they would almost certainly accept him as a friend.

"Indeed." Aragorn replied, a little stunned by Chief's answer. "We are friends of Rohan, and friends of Thًoden your king."

And on that, they had his trust. Aًomer's eyes were betraying strong emotions, the pain of events still burning fresh in his memory. "Thًoden mind is bewitched, fallen to shadow. He no longer recognises his own people, not even those of his kin." His mind was calm but his heart was heavy. A great many troubles lay upon him in these dark days.

"Noble John speaks of Sauron. Sauron is the single greatest threat to the world of men, but as of now my people deal with another. Saruman has poisoned the mind of the king and claimed lordship over our lands. There has been war between us for many months." In war, subterfuge was often equally as powerful as strength at arms. "It is ill dealing with such a foe. He is a wizard of both cunning and wisdom. He walks here and there, they say, as an old man hooded and cloaked. His spies slip through every net, and his birds of ill omen are abroad in the sky. With the king's mind overthrown, the rule of our country falls to those under Saruman's thrall. My company and I are that which is loyal to Rohan. And for that, we are banished, under pain of death should we ever return."

Was the situation really so bleak? Saruman's arm had grown long indeed.

"We are banished, but still we fight. The Uruks that you spoke of before are destroyed, slain to a beast, we slaughtered them in the dead of night." And it was this information alone that stopped the five men's minds cold.

"The little ones!" Boromir gasped, feeling faintness as his reclaimed strength threatened to leave him once again. It couldn't be true.

"The hobbits, there were two hobbits, did you see two hobbits with them!" Gimli begged from him. But received naught but a blank look from the Marshall.

"Hobbits are nothing more than the things of fairy tales, Gimli son of Gloin." Ælomer replied dryly. Was the dwarf jesting him once more?

"No. They're not." The Master Chief replied. He was the glue holding this meeting together. "Hobbits are real, two were taken from our company by the Uruk-Hai."

"He speaks the truth." Aragorn continued, "They would be small, no bigger than children to your eyes."

There was no hint of a lie in these warriors' words. And from what little he'd learned of John, of all the men standing before him, he knew that these were a people of great integrity. "These are indeed strange days." He told them in sigh. "We found no hobbits, although I believe you. We left none alive. We piled the carcasses high and burned them to ashes."

It was a shock admission, and his honest words sunk into them like knives. "I see that the ill news injures you." An empathetic Ælomer consoles. "I am sorry. But, for I know, they may not yet be slain." The consolation was true. They had neither confirmation nor contradiction that they were dead. Only anxiety that it was the former. Ælomer's men were short on time, and could do little for them. But, horseless men could not get far in the world. And whilst he did not have enough free horses, a gesture of kindness was still just that.

Ælomer gave a sharp whistle. *Pweeep!*, calling to two of the steeds under his command. "Hasufel! Arod!" And on command, the two steeds came trotting over to him, obediently. "May these two horses, bear you to better fates than their masters."

Boromir nodded in thanks. "I shall remember your kindness, and return it should we meet again." In a world at war, it was certainly likely that two commanders could one day cross paths again.

The grim Marshall almost managed a smile! "Look for your friends, the Uruks pyre is not three leagues from here. Start your search there perhaps. But do not count on hope, for it is forsaken in these lands." He looked around at them. These lands. One day, the fight would be over and he would trust them again.

"Time is short, farewell. Rohirrim! We ride north!" And on that, the riders were in flight once more. And soon, with the trundling sounds of hundreds of hooved died away, the travellers and their new steeds were left alone once more.

The riders now gone, Cortana crawled from underneath her cloak, throwing it once again around her shoulders. "Well. At least we got some horsies out of it all!" She chirped, attempting to lighten the

current mood.

"Indeed." Aragorn replied with a sigh and shake of his head. No one could tell if he was irritated, or amused by her remark. "We ride two apiece. Two riders for each horse. Legolas take Arod, Gimli on behind. I shall take Hasufel. Boromir, you shall ride with me." Both passengers were a little disappointed. Gimli, for it was undignified and humiliating, and Boromir because he had a rather romantic image of him riding, whilst Cortana the passenger behind. Not to be!

"Chief!" Aragorn asked. "I have seen you run. You fly with the speed of horses, not men. Can you keep up for that distance?" It was a spectacular ask, even for a Spartan. A mad sprint for what would be a great distance between here and its end.

"I don't know. Never had to match pace with a horse." But he had to admit, he was more than eager to give the challenge its due! "If all else fails, the trail of the Rohirrim will be easy to follow."

"And a challenge it will indeed be, for these are the horses of the Mark. Broad in the waist and swift at the foot. Not finer steeds of men will you find than those of the breeders of the Eorlingas." Aragorn told him. And as he analysed the animals, looking them up and down, he knew it was true.

Only the largest breeds of horse compared in muscle and size to those now under their care. And yet these were finer still. For unlike a dray horse these were sleek and refined, tall yet chiselled with the well-honed features of a thoroughbred racer. Frantic and twitchy, a barely contained angst and nervous energy to their nature. Attentive and ready to run at a moments notice.

"Err, Chief. I'm no horse!" Cortana piped up, breaking his line of thought, alerting him to a problem he hadn't considered. "I'm already exhausted, and the two beasties can only take two each." There was only one thing for it, as much as she hated it. She was going to have to jack back into his armour.

"Ok." Cortana sighed rhetorically. Her eyes closed, and just like had done only once before, her features flattened, and her body dissolved away into light. Leaving only her CPU and an empty cloak behind. Much to the absolute astonishment of the other four, who had not yet seen her do this.

"In all that is sacred..." A shocked Boromir murmured, almost in prayer. Chief bent down, placing Cortana into the back of his helmet and rolling up her cloak, rolling it back in his armour.

"You shouldn't have done that." He scolded her, his external speakers off. "I could have carried you. They weren't ready for that." Shocked faces were still bearing down on the Spartan.

"What? And left me clinging on for dear life as a breakneck Spartan thunders over uneven ground, at thirty miles an hour plus? I don't think so Mr!" Well, when she put it like that...

"Alright!" Aragorn announced, snapping out of his astonishment. He was the most used out of the four of them to seeing ethereal sights like this. And he had actually gazed more with wonder than shock. "We

move out!"

With a kick of the flanks and flick of the reins, the horse sprang into motion. Legolas did the same, his fine grey steed carrying him and Gimli away at speed. Then, accelerating slowly, but inevitably, Chief powered onwards. Breathing heavily and working on overdrive he was, but it was enough. And the shocked eyes of Gimli and Boromir stared at him without blink as the super soldier matched pace behind them.

"Oh, and Chief?" Cortana piped up once more. "Son of Halsey!?" She laughed long and hard, giggling in her now usual manner. "It was like you wanted me to burst out laughing John!"

4. Omens and Thieves

_Sorry for the dull chapter. I had a couple of odd ideas floating around in my head and needed to put them on print before I continued.

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More with John and Cortana coming. As is Fred. Chief gets a mobile call. Gandalf should be interesting to.

Thanks for all the supporters. You are awesome!

* * *

><p>The world was changing. All that was left now, was to remove those who opposed him. Against the powers of both Sauron and he, Saruman, he knew that there could be no victory. The old world was weak. And within the fires of war and engines of industry, it would be torn down, down to its last brick and nail-board. From its foundations a new world would be manufactured. One worthy of life, one strong enough to survive. A world, that unlike the previous, would be worthy of his rule.</p>

And yet, the wizard felt a great strain upon him. On his mind, his body, and spirit. The lengths needed to achieve his goals were labours extreme in their hardship. To fight the will of an entire world, no matter how inferior. And to contend with the iron might of Sauron, the great enemy of this world and its hopeful next, was a task that many would call impossible. And then, most trying of all these hardships, which inflicted the greatest pain of all, was the creation of new and unique life.

The music of the Aunir, the song of creation was a power both hallowed and sacred. The irresistible force of the secret fire, the Flame Imperishable, burned strong within all forms of life. All beings possessed within them a share of the power of creation. Many amongst the mortal elves, pure of heart and spirit, had spent centuries honing their heart and spirit to channel this inner power. Gifted, capable of wonders, acts that lesser people called magic, and even witchcraft. Stupid creatures who perceived this power not with reverence, but with suspicion and outright fear.

But then there were others, lesser even than the elves, lesser even than the dwarves. These were the creatures he would purge from existence. The orc, the goblin, the wraith. And perhaps even man. They would either adapt to his new world, or would perish in the

attempt. Perhaps it had been too long since they'd last been capable of greatness. Perhaps they were too weak to change. Time would tell. He would pass judgement on their actions, not his prejudices.

The wizard sat hunched, breathing heavily, only his staff preventing him from keeling over as he sat. Candles lit and oil lamps burning. As were the coals within his baroque and ornate fireplaces. Well stoked, and heat pouring from them. And yet he felt cold. Something about his power and majesty felt amiss. He felt physically weak.

Indeed the Flame Imperishable did burn strong within all life. But like any energy, when divided and shared out amongst new vessels, a power shrank in its potency and magnitude. He felt stretched and frail. He felt ill and sickly. The problem was the Nimmah. In the act of building new life, strong life, he had poured his own essence into these creatures. And it had weakened him greatly.

The first few dozen or so creatures had been an equal to his last. Some if not more powerful as he had honed and improved his methods and focussed his power. But now the deed was taking its toll. He could build no more. A single legion, ninety of the mighty fiends now lay under his command. But each brought into life since then had been slighter of build, physically weaker than the previous. To the extent where the least of them had been little stronger than the mightiest of his Uruk-hai.

But his work was still success. He had created his soldiers. Enough alone to face an army of the pathetic free peoples. But as a result his body lay broken, and his spirit would take generations to recover. Victory came first. And it needed his mind, not his body to come to fruition. The mysterious Spartan had forced his hand, and he had answered the challenge with irresistible success. The man did not belong on this world. And like any pest, would be exterminated without pity.

It was only a matter of time.

But had it been worth it? To exist now in the ruined shell of a once powerful body? Eventually It would be a limited and hellish existence from here on out. Until he had healed. The chill, the feeling of cold was maddening. The lamps and furnaces burned to their fullest potential and still he felt frozen. Even in his current state. This wasn't just physical weakness. Something felt wrong and out of place. Something enhancing his feelings of illness and discomfort.

And in horror, he realised what the source of this feeling was.

A shadow and a threat began to move in his mind. He could sense something. A precognitive thought, informing him of a great danger moving through his world. He could feel their presence, the presence of things that even Istari felt angst and dread on facing. Forces, bodies moving through his tower. Pacing without obstruction, upwards and closer. Seconds away from him. The agents of his collaborator closing in.

As the chill in the air and his body reached a howling crescendo, the Nine threw open the doors of his study, and paced into the centre of his throne room. Silent, ominous, awaiting for a moment he knew not what.

"You have no rights to be here, in my domain." Saruman decreed to the greatest of the Dark Lords servants. He had realised why they were here. And he would not stand for it.

There was a pause of a moment, as if the air itself clung still and the ebb of time ceased to flow. A stand-off. For even in his weakened state, Saruman the White was still a threat to the Nazgul. Then, the Witch King took three steps forward. He moved out from the centre of his companions, each parting to create space for their superior to pass. Not a word was given, not a signal, as if each mind within the unit was in tune with the other. And knew consciously what was being thought by each.

"You, have forgotten your place." The wraith hissed at the lord of Isengard. "You were given contract, by our lord, to build soldiers. Not for yourself, but for him." Not one of the opponents was intimidated by the other. Not one was wary of the other. Each confident in the others' inferiority. "You have forgotten your place. You are not commander, but lieutenant. And your role in this scheme is subservience. To him, and to us."

Saruman took the insult well. The wraith referred "by us" of course, to the Nine. Outright implying that the greatest of the Istari was lesser to each and every one of these fallen shells of kings.

"Power Nazgul, is not merely given but is earned. Subservience is achieved through action, not word. I bow to Sauron, but not to you shades. And whilst I preside over Isengard, you will never have dominion over this realm and its contents." It was a bold claim, and Saruman chose his words carefully. He would not outright defy Sauron, but he would his servants. The Nine knew his true allegiance, but could never prove it unless he stated it.

So long as he alone held the secrets to these Nimmah, he would have a weapon against Sauron. Something that gave him an advantage over the Lord of Mordor. Sauron knew it. The wraiths were here to take that advantage from him. Blatant thievery. Whist Mordor was the greater, Sauron lacked his ingenuity. And would have to fight to keep the dominant power in this world.

"You would claim treachery from us?" The Witch King answered. "And yet of course the treachery is all yours. You swore, allegiance and unreserved obedience to our master. A pledge which cannot be broken. You will bow to his will."

Staring into the face of the Witch King, he could have sworn that for a moment he saw the eye of Sauron, not the empty shell of the wraith burning under its hood.

"So, the Dark Lord himself is watching." Saruman could not help but smile. Mordor needed Isengard. For all Sauron's power, he needed him to keep Rohan in check. He could not fight both these powers in addition to the other defiant kingdoms of the world. Whilst both Gondor and Rohan stood, Saruman was immune to every empty threat these ring wraiths had for him.

"The treachery is only yours." He corrected them. "The rights to another lord's power is taken, not offered out of weakness. Only

through force shall you have my weapon. And no other action will allow it." Through unknown to the wraiths, Saruman began to meditate, in communion with his spirit. Rent and mutilated it was now, but through it, his power acted like a conduit.

He could feel his soldiers, the beings created through his own life. Whilst most hibernated in the depths of his foundries, there was one who patrolled the halls and stairways of his great tower. He had known this stand-off was inevitable. _"Your master is endangered." _Saruman communed with his solider. _"Rise up, know fire and rage, defend me. Ensure the survival of your home dominion!" _The deed done, he opened up his eyes once more. So weak, but with the remainder of his strength needed, he stood to defy the wraiths.

In reply, sensing the wizard's powers build, they drew their swords in unison. These were not the weaklings of before. With war approaching, they could feel their powers rising. Their full strength gathering closer. These would stand their ground. These were a far more formidable threat to a lone Istari. And they would not fail their lord Sauron, ruler of all earth and beyond!

The wraiths drew into a single line, and the Witch King's made to move towards Saruman. In a moment, the wizard straightened, rising to his full height, and aimed his staff at the subservient creature. Before completing a single step, the wraith was struck with an irresistible and invisible force, throwing it backwards with a shriek. The wraith stayed standing, skidding backwards with its iron boots scraping loud and shrill against the smooth marble floor. And hit the wall behind with a loud thud, falling to the ground. The entire event taking place within the blink of an eye.

The other wraiths drew forwards, swords zeroed on the Istari. Weak, the wizard slumped left, balance collapsing, knees buckled, supporting himself with his staff. Then, tearing through the doorway that the Nazgul themselves had thrown open, came the Nimmah. It slammed into the wraiths, bowling over the first three of them on the left, grabbing two of them at once with its wide and massive arms. The Nimmah launched the two held aloft by it into the others.

With wraiths sprawled, the Witch King picked itself up.

What followed next was sheer chaos. Wraiths tumbling left and right, thrown into the air hitting tables and pillars. Breaking vials and scientific instruments, one even smacking straight into the Palantir's pillar. The orb itself rolling out of its cloth, bouncing away from the rolling scrum as the Nimmah threw all its strength at the wraiths. Again, the disciplined creatures found themselves taken completely off guard by a more aggressive, physically superior creature. The last thing they expected was to be attacked by the very weapon they were attempting to take. The creature was rightfully theirs. But Saruman had been correct, they would have to earn this prize.

A wraith screamed as it found itself thrown into one of Sauruman's burning fire places. Dry cloak setting ablaze, its musky smell saturating the room surrounding as is burned. Inspired, Saruman held his staff aloft once more. Still kneeling, the fires within the room began to quake and glow. Growing like the shoots of vines, they rose out of their glass and iron prisons, circling the room in twisting halos of destruction.

The wraiths screamed, and those less adept than the others, or with the Nimmah still beating down on them as they lay, failed to resist the flames. But they did not scatter. They did not run. These were not the weak cowards of before. Emboldened by the will and power of their lord, they continued to fight. The Witch King meanwhile, most powerful of the Nine, was immune. Channelling the wizard's fire around his ghostly form, like water not fire, marched once more on the wizard.

His power focussed on his incantation, Saruman was vulnerable. But not defenceless. "Nimmah!" he cried, his booming voice shaking the items of the room if not all of Orthanc, and the creature responded. Throwing its current beating thing aside, it ran at the Witch King. Detecting the danger in an instant.

Sword held vertically, channelling the wizard's fire around the weapon as it paced closer. Hearing the roar of the Istari's attack dog behind, the wraith responded. Displaying agility that seemed way out of character, it dropped, low and fast. The leaping Nimmah flying dumbly right overhead. Completely wrong-footing his opponent. Pulsing with a sickly green energy, the wraith began to chant.

What extreme warmth the room once had, began to give way to cold. The fires seemed to lose their potency, and the other wraiths adapted in kind. Whilst six of them burned, another two remained untouched. Having sustained the spell for so long, and with the Witch King competing directly with his power, Saruman's strength failed again. The flames died and perished, casting the room into twilight as naught but a couple of candles kept burning.

Now the wraiths were in their element.

The Witch King still chanting, the fires of the wraiths began to extinguish themselves. Slowly, each one disappeared into the gloom behind. Not yet beaten, Saruman willed his staff's crystal to light. The weak beams pulsed forth, revealing the concealed wraiths again as they approached closer.

With a defiant roar, the Nimmah charged again, loyal to its master. The wraiths closed on it in circle, and not making the same mistakes as before, began to duel with the beast successfully. Even then, the surrounded Nimmah held them at bay. At eight feet tall, the barrel-chested creature could strike them down even at sword length. Swatting them aside like rag dolls time and time again. But it could not kill them. And eventually, swords began to cleave into its flesh and muscle.

Finally, Saruman too weak to aid his creation, three swords penetrated its chest and shoulders. Stabbing into its muscles, effectively disabling both its arms as the swords came back out. The Witch King approached, sheathing its sword for a moment. It sidestepped the beast's flailing arms, and with the other eight wraiths desperately trying to hold it firm, placed its hands on its heart and its chest. Now all of the wraiths were chanting in prayer.

The creature roared and fought against the wraiths. Leverage had a strength all of its own, and kept it still. Then, the Nimmah's flailing's began to grow less and less aggressive, and it's roars

becoming quieter and quieter.

_ "NO!" _ Saruman thought out on reflex. His weapon about to be taken right from under him, he hit them with one last attack. A wave of power flooded over the wraiths, a terrific sorcerer's blast. All nine were thrust away from his warrior, and impacted the far wall behind in a pile of cloaks and limbs.

Then, his triumph turned to loss.

The Nimmah roared in anger, and charged. This time, at Saruman himself. The exhausted wizard held up his staff with both hands, and rose to his feet. But was completely blindsided by the monster as he smacked full force into him. Slamming him against the throne behind with a gasp. The Nimmah crashed its massive foot down onto the wizard's stomach. Pinning him in place.

The single-minded creature's loyalties had turned. All it had ever been programmed to do was protect and fight for its master. And this was exactly what it was doing now. Defending its master, Sauron.

The wraiths approached the wizard in unit. Swords sheathed, many cloaks burned to tatters. But the fight was over now. And Saruman had lost. Knowing it, he stopped struggling against the superhuman Nimmah.

"And now, we have the right to Nimmah." The Witch King told him simply, almost at a whisper. And couldn't help but feel satisfaction in this. Even after the Nimmah had released Saruman, he would always be pinned to that throne of his. Unable to escape it, until the Dark Lord allowed it. Through his demise.

Then the Wraiths turned. Making their leave. They had what they needed. The Nimmah stared into the wizard's eyes for a long moment, with foul and animalistic eyes. All the same, Saruman, unable to breathe with the massive weight of his creation pressing down, felt he was being analysed by the creature. Perhaps he saw the defeat betrayed by them. Perhaps it didn't have the gifts of mind to do so. He couldn't know for sure.

Finally, the foot lifted, freeing the Master of Isengard. And it hobbled after its new allegiance masters. Its bleeding, useless arms flailing at its sides, wounds its new allies themselves had inflicted. Wounds the simple-minded creature cared nothing for. Its fate, would be vivisection. _ "Mordor will learn its secrets", _ the Witch King mused.

Minutes later, the wraiths were outside. Mounting their horses once again. With a kick of the flanks, the mounts roared, and took flight. The Nimmah perusing behind. Their mission done...

* * *

><p>"Wake the Captain! Send word to the captain! Send aid to the refugees below!" The guard leader called to his men. He didn't know if any had survived behind the Deeping Wall below. Not where it had fallen at least. Appearing without warning, a fragment of burning rock had fallen from the skies. It had come from behind, striking the mountainside above, raining burning fragments on the displaced farms men and women below.<p>

It was night time, stars peeking out from behind the grey clouds above. What before had been a peaceful haven, with people preparing for a night's sleep had been turned to hell. People screaming, children wailing. Something had come from the sky above, a burning shooting star. It had hit the ground behind the Deeping Wall. Then rolled through the civilian caravans below until it had finally slammed into the wall itself and come to rest.

It had all but burned itself out now. A few smouldering patches remained. And yet, still all was not well. Men were dead, children and women to perhaps. But most puzzling of all was the shooting star itself.

Now, the guard on watch had heard that shooting stars weren't stars at all, but rock. Rock falling from the skies of all things. But this wrecked object below was neither a glowing orb of light nor a chunk of rock.

Charging down from the gatehouse, he and the men under his care headed for the section of the fortress that lead to the Deeping Wall. Charging down the steps to the ground below, they headed for it.

"Help them up! And keep that man down, he's bleeding. Bring bandages!" He called out behind, to other men who were rushing down to aid these poor and simple people. They'd promised them they were safe here. But no one could have predicted these foul events transpiring. It was an ill omen to be sure. And of that omen, he a mere five strides away from the fallen object now, was entranced by what he saw.

There it was, smouldering, innocent enough looking now, all torn up with sharp angles protruding from it. Resting between the end of the great wall and the even greater mountain beside. This was no fragment of rock, this was metal. A giant, twisted, metal box, like a fort had plummeted out of the sky. It was burned and shredded. It had walls pitted with what looked like massive nails, which had been screwed in place by some hand.

"What in all earth is this?" One of his men called out. Transfixed, the guard moved forwards again. Standing right in front of it, and lifted up his hand to touch.

"Bad luck I tell you." A voice inside his head warned. But his curiosity had already gotten the better of him, and he placed his bare hand against the object's surface. It was hot, very hot, but not enough to burn him instantly. Although, he was sure that if he left his hand on long enough, it would well start to blister. He peered inside the thing, his eyes straining to see any details with the pale light of the moon and stars the only thing to illuminate its interior.

"You! Err, Abeodan." He told the newest boy under his command. "You have a brand, bring it closer. Give it to me. There's something inside this shooting star I'm sure." He could smell something to. A familiar odour that he hadn't yet put a memory to.

The young lad did as asked. He'd been one of the refugees to arrive with the others. Saruman be cursed. The lad was young but able

bodied, and as soon as he'd been fed and watered, they'd given him and axe and shield, then put him to use.

Holding the burning brand, he held it to the edge of the fallen star, he had no other word for it. Then peered inside. "Earth and sky!" He immediately gasped. "There's bodies in here!" He said, turning to the others. Identifying the smell. How could this be?!

The men came closer, and each looked inside, answering their doubtful minds. They examined the object further, and found at its end what seemed like a hatch of some sort. They heaved against it, and it came down with a loud clang. It was Metal! Their eyes didn't deceive. Whatever structure had been holding it in place, it had been pulverised by the impact, weak, hadn't been hard to dislodge. Bringing lights, they stared inside with awe.

There were boxes everywhere. Strange green boxes, like crates almost, but metal. Some long and flat. Some forearm sized. Others man sized. One was broken, and seemed to have what looked like misshapen tubes inside. And then there were people. Also dressed green. Wearing cloth of a many different shades of the colour until it looked natural, and what looked like armour to. Big thick sections of, again, green metal. On their chests, limbs and head. Of which like they had never seen before.

And, all of them dead.

"What are these men? Demons?" One man asked him. He didn't know. But this went beyond his knowledge. Metal forts filled with little green men didn't just fall out of the sky. He didn't understand what he was seeing.

"Hey look! There are symbols on the side here." The young Abeodan called out. It was true. Symbols, similar to those used in writing. Yes...it was writing. Simple men could tell that much. White symbols, big and chunky. But of a language none of the men knew or understand. A man well versed in the languages of the world might have said it looked a bit like Dwarfish.

What could it possibly say? Whilst the men could not apply meaning or sounds to these symbols, all could see its shape, and could have sketched it down had they had paper to draw on.

—"PELICAN."—

Nope. For all they tried. They just couldn't understand what it was they were seeing.

5. As One Stage Ends

The air was filled with smoke, and nothing but the crackle of dying fires, and the gentle whisper of the wind moving through the trees could be heard. For there was an unusual stillness in the air. There was no birdsong, not the rustling of any other animal could be heard from within the deep and twisted forest. Where no wind, and very little light seemed to penetrate its broad and swollen treeline. This was a woodland that had been untouched by the hands of men or elves for generations.

But the peace would not last. For soon, from the hills beyond came the unmistakable sound of galloping horses, wandering towards the ears of the forest. Closer the riders came, stopping a mere dozen strides from where the murder pyre lay ahead, as not to discomfort their steeds. To keep them out of the worst of the smog, that even now they could feel tickling the backs of their throats as they walked towards the pile of dead Uruk-hai.

The four hunters had finally caught their quarry, perhaps too late. They were apprehensive. And feared the worst. The Eorlingas had told them that they had found no Halflings. Had they slaughtered all the Uruks? The carcasses were piled high, but perhaps their quarry had split and headed into many groups? Perhaps not all were accounted for on this pyre. There had been no evidence of this event however, and Uruks were heavy footed. Confident in their tracking skills they all were, yet even the wisest, most experience hunter could lose their prey occasionally.

So they started digging, sifting through the burnt and stinking bodies of the foul Uruk-hai. Even in death, with skin burned to cinders they still seemed fierce and animalistic. From the ground they had come, and to which their ashes would now return. Perhaps it was a mercy. What a terrible form of life they were. They knew not beauty or the pleasures of life. Only malice and pain. But the fellowship did not ponder on these questions long. For it was not the remains of Uruks they were searching for.

They needed confirmation. They needed to know the fates of the little ones. How had the Rohirrim not seen the Halflings? Hobbits could hide astounding well from the likes of man, more so then you would expect. But the Uruks had been caught in the open. If they escaped by some chance, then they must have hidden in the trees or they would have been seen. But if they found nothing of them between here and the eaves of the wood, nor upon the battle-field and among the ashes, the chances of their survival were slim. The horsemen of Rohan had done their murder work too well.

"Where is the Chief?" Gimli asked gruffly. "His strength would make ease of this task. And his armour would save him having to endure the smell." It had not been difficult for Chief to explain to them the principles of his vacuum sealed suit. In a world where making watertight skins was common, the idea that this principle could also be applied to armour was not so farfetched. Although, they hadn't yet figured out how it was possible the Spartan could breathe!

But his question stood. Where was John? With their horses travelling at their fullest, they had lost sight of him less than two leagues ago. The warrior had set a shocking pace at first, keeping foot (or possibly hoof!) with the horses of the Rohirrim no less. But eventually even the Spartan had needed to slow his pace, and they had lost eye of him after winding long through the hilly pass towards Fangorn...

* * *

><p>"Good Chief! Couple of kilometres left to run. You've been maintaining a pace of 27.2km for a long while now. Take it down just a little so we're not burning off too much energy." Cortana continued updating him, monitoring his vitals and getting the most out of her soldier. "Hope you're not too embarrassed about getting left behind

by the horsies!"<p>

He wasn't. His face was stern, all emotion purged from it. It had been interesting, pushing himself, trying his luck to see how well he could keep up with the animals. He had surprised himself, and the others most certainly. But after the first four kilometres, sensibility had kicked in. It was pointless to burn himself out over a single, pointless event. He was in the wilderness, with finite supplies, performing what already was a demanding forced march. The others needed him, and they hadn't yet succeeded in catching the hobbits.

"Look! We can even see the pyre now. I just hope they're ok."

Again, they were out in the wilderness, and he couldn't afford to burn himself out for idiotic reasons. Not with people relying on them. At least Cortana wasn't giving him too much grief. She was only half joking now, also worried for the little ones. She could be trying at times. But, it was nice to hear her voice coming from inside his helmet again.

* * *

><p>"And this is what your elf eyes see Legolas!" Aragorn called out to the sentinel standing on lookout.<p>

"Indeed! He heads from the foot of the hills. He makes good haste, and will be with us in little time." Good was an understatement. The Spartan could be truly inspiring at times.

The other three continued to work, picking their way through the debris. Some of the pyre's contents crumbled in their grasp, and their hands and arms were now covered with oil and black, oozing liquid. And the smell. Burrowing through the sickening mass of bodily remains and armour. Then, moving a corpse aside, Aragorn spies something. Against a mass of black, he sees a charred, yet evidently coloured item. Not completely burned, with patches of faded green that still remained.

Uruks shunned such colours. He recognises it immediately, and picks it from the pile and holds it.

"It's one of their wee belts!" Gimli speaks in grim recognition.

Legolas hears this, turning from his watch and heading over to the others.

Boromir stands, silent. Clearly distressed by what he was seeing. _"Not after all we have given!" _It was an ill omen. The first evidence they had found of them, suggesting that the hobbits were fallen.

Silence fell over them for a long while. Despondent they were all, and the quiet continued until Boromir turned from the hobbits' little belt and heading back towards the pyre, pulling out bodies with fervent vigour. _"Nay! It cannot be! We find the bodies. We find there corpses or refute it!"_

Gimli, as if sensing his thoughts walked over to him, putting a hand

on his shoulder. "Leave it. A man cannot search the entire pyre."

Flushed and red-faced, Boromir fell still. The corpses were piled high, and it could take hours if not some days to find a hobbits' body. The truth was, that their minds were divided. They didn't know what to think. The hobbits had kept themselves alive in Moria, but resourcefulness had its limits. And the two had been a liability throughout the journey. Pitched battle was hazardous, a charging horse could trample and kill without effort.

They needed more evidence, clues to the two hobbit's fates. But as of now, distraction came their way. The sound of boots against earth. The Master Chief was back, and he had now caught up with the remainder of the fellowship.

"Amazing work Chief! But it's not over yet. We still have to find the hobbits. I only hope they're alive. It would kill me if anything happened to them." Cortana reported as John ground to a halt. He was fatigued now, and breathing heavily. But he would soon catch his breath. His armour was already refuelling his body with isotonic solution, replacing fluids and blood sugars lost over the course of the long haul run.

His appearance lifted their spirits a little, lessening the impact of their negative thoughts and worries. Whatever his true origins, he was a great ally to them. A supernaturally powerful warrior, who alone could influence the outcome of the war at large. Not even the Dark Lord had a Spartan on hand!

"You continue to amaze us John. We cannot thank you enough for all that you have done." Everything that he had given so far had been out of charity, no one had forgotten this.

"Thank you." He replied, still sucking through air as his body recovered. Humanity was in trouble. This was all that mattered, the only reason he needed.

"What have we found so far? Any traces of them?" He asked immediately, wishing to complete their objective as efficiently as possible.

"Ill news." Legolas replied to him. "We discover a hobbit's belt and empty sheath amongst the burned remains of the funeral pyre. The mallorn-leaf binding of like fashioned only within Lothlorien." A bad start, not enough to confirm them dead.

"What else?" He asked from them.

They were silent, they had not discovered anything else of them. Indeed, their despair had been too hasty. Quiet of them was Aragorn, who as eyes tracked to him in interest, they found him kneeled, deep in concentration and examining the ground below.

"Cortana, what is he seeing?" Chief asked, realising immediately that the man was tracking once more.

"Hmmm...Not much Chief. The ground is pretty bare, only a few scuffed areas, and a couple of depressions no less. Most likely from the skirmish last night. Feet and hooves and bodies falling about the

place no doubt." She reported as the others listened. Impressed by her quick deductions.

"Just that Cortana." Aragorn replied in compliment, "For it were hobbits which lay here before." This shocked everyone including even Cortana.

"What? Hobbits? Let me do a quick scan...measuring the size of the depressions...yes, yes! Too small and shallow for a big Uruk to have fallen here. A couple of depressions I said. Why didn't I think of it before?" For their lack of processing power, and even lateral thinking, humans could even occasionally astound AI's at times. Meanwhile, she was deliberating if she should leave Chief's helmet or not. For now, she was enjoying the novelty of it. It was just like old times! And, after the exhausting past few days, she was more than willing to let Chief's legs do all the work!

"Not bad, ranger!" She told the ranger in compliment. Aragorn looked up at Chief, and smiled warmly in reply. Making her emotions flutter for a merest moment. Awen was a lucky gal to be sure!

His eyes then went serious, and he began to work once more. "They lay here, shuffling and moving." He thought out loud as he slowly pieced together the clues he was seeing. "They crawled!" He announced in recognition, sensing further depressions to the left and forward of the ones before. Boromir, Gimli and Chief watched him with fascination. All were accomplished soldiers, but knew that Aragorn's ability to do what he was doing went far and above what skill they had.

Aragorn continued to move forwards, moving on his hands and knees himself now as the others followed, retracing the steps of the little ones. "They may have been bound" He continued on, and announced once he had travelled a particular distance. It was the best explanation for why they had chosen to crawl for so long.

"Damn he's good!" Cortana mused, Chief's speaker now switched off as not to distract Aragorn. "I can just about keep up with him myself." And that was saying something. Yet still, the rangers face was set grim, a constant angst in his mind. Realistically, if the hobbits had been bound for so long, than their chances in this melee would have been slim.

Then he detected it.

Within the dust and soil and ash, concealed almost in the loose ground, were ropes. He took them, turning them over and over in examination. Two small sections of rope, each a few inches long. Tied into a loop. Tied! Bounds they were! And what was more, they had been cleaved apart, no longer loops but lengths. "Their bounds were cut!" He said, his voice betraying excitement. How could he have not? The hobbits' chances of survival had just increased exponentially.

"Hehe! I thought he'd enjoy that bit!" Cortana said in analysis. She'd overtaken that part of the story as soon as she'd seen the rope. Hell, this had been a deduction beneath hers and Aragorn's calibre. But now, with the trail growing complex again, he'd caught her up. It was a good omen, Chief was sure. If Cortana was bantering again, she was confident that the hobbits were alive.

"They stood, and ran...over here!" Aragorn told them, he himself now jogging after the footprints. He could almost picture the hobbits running to and throw as they attempted to survive the battle around them.

"And...It seems they were followed." A perceptive elf added from behind, noting an abrupt pause in their trail, their merger with another, and a lot of black blood staining the ground around. Aragorn paused for a moment, and confirmed what Legolas had said.

"Hmm...Perhaps that's how the belt was lost, in the struggle perhaps?" Cortana mused. But without asking the dead Uruks, or the hobbits themselves, she had no means of validation.

Then, they continued on. After their obstruction, the hobbits had continued. "Their tracks lead away from the battle!" The ranger shouted to the others, speeding up as he saw the stride lengths between the footprints grow.

"Oh damn" Cortana cried out, knowing where their road had lead them. Everyone had stopped now, and was gazing into the high and twisted forest towering above them.

"Away from the battle...into Fangorn forest." Chief stated flatly. He had familiarised himself with the region the night before, and did not like what his knowledge was telling him.

All their elation had been turned, again, to angst.

"And I saw Lothlorien to be a fell wood in all its regard." Boromir stated, gazing into the black and twisted confines of the place, if you could call it a woodland.

"Fangorn. What madness drove them in there?"

It seemed that the tracking of their quarry had not yet ended after all. They just hoped that the fabled stealth of hobbits was exaggerated...

End
file.